

Herbs and other garden friends

How are herbs different from other flowers and plants? An herb is a plant valued for its medicinal, culinary or fragrant properties. Many herbs are grown as ornamentals as well as used for crafts, culinary or therapeutic purposes, and some are grown for environmental benefit.



Herbs can be grown in a variety of landscapes. Traditionally, herbs were grown in specialty gardens: herb gardens, knot gardens, kitchen or chefs gardens, medicine gardens, and fragrance gardens. Recently, there has been a greater trend toward interspersing herbs into flower and vegetable gardens. Theme gardens are gaining popularity with people planting pizza or salsa gardens. With the reported decline of bees and butterflies, there has been a growing movement toward planting herbs in butterfly gardens to encourage pollination.

Herbs also do well in containers, either outside or inside in a sunny location. Most herbs need a minimum of four to six hours of sunlight a day. In winter, herbs growing indoors will benefit from 12 hours of artificial lighting. Growing herbs in containers allows gardeners to move tender perennials, like scented geraniums, patchouli and bay, indoors before a cold snap. Herbs that don't tolerate wet feet during a rainy season, like chervil, cilantro, cumin, chamomile and French tarragon do well in containers so they can be moved out of the rain if they are getting too wet. All containers should have drainage holes so water does not pool in the bottom of the pot. Any saucers under containers should be drained and kept free of standing water.

Herbs can grow under varying conditions. While most herbs prefer full sun and well-drained soil with a pH range of 6.0-7.5, many can grow under adverse conditions. Sweet woodruff, parsley, bee balm, comfrey and mints do fine in shady, moist locations. Thyme can tolerate some gentle abuse and is often planted along walkways where bruising the leaves emits a pleasant fragrance.

Herbs are often grown near the house, not only because they are fragrant and attractive but because it makes it easier to snip and use culinary herbs if they are near the kitchen. Culinary herbs are used for their flowers, foliage, roots or seeds and can be used fresh, dried or frozen. Dried herbs are more potent than fresh or frozen. It takes three times the amount of fresh or frozen herbs when substituting for dried.

To dry herbs, tie them in a bunch and hang them bloom-side down in a dark, dry, well-ventilated but warm environment. Label them because herbs are hard to identify after drying. Fresh herb leaves may be rinsed, patted dry and frozen in plastic bags or containers. Another method is to drop leaves into ice cube trays and suspended in water before freezing. Once frozen, the cubes may be removed from the tray and frozen in plastic bags or containers.

Harvesting herb foliage can be done anytime. Harvesting just before blooming will capture the essential oils at their most concentrated, making the flavor and fragrance the strongest. Seeds, like dill and fennel, are harvested once they have set on and matured. Dill and fennel both reseed profusely, so deadheading before seeds mature is best if you are not wishing to harvest the seeds. When to harvest roots depends on which herb is being harvested. Flowers are harvested when in bloom.

Herbs are sometimes used in companion planting, which is planting two or more species of plants together for pest control, greater production or other mutual benefit without compromising the plants. Research is limited on companion planting, but enough has been completed to validate certain claims. Using dill as an example, squash bugs, cabbage loopers, spider mites and aphids are repelled by dill, while beneficial insects, like bees, butterflies, hoverflies and predatory wasps are attracted to dill. Dill also augments the growing of spinach, onion, garlic, lettuce, cucumbers, melons and cole crops, such as cabbage, broccoli, Brussel sprouts, kale and cauliflower.

Herbs can also be used in trap cropping. Trap cropping is the planting or sacrificing of one crop to benefit another crop. An example is planting dill to attract swallowtail butterflies to help pollinate the garden. The swallowtail butterfly caterpillars use dill foliage for food before morphing into butterflies. Dill also attracts tomato hornworm, so sacrificing dill to keep the hornworms away from tomatoes benefits tomatoes if the dill is planted a distance away since dill and tomatoes are not compatible when planted together.